

Book Review

The Importance of Being Little: What Preschoolers Really Need from Grownups

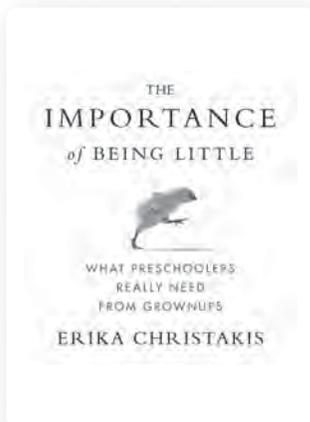
by Erika Christakis

Penguin Random House 2016, 400 pages

Hardcover, \$28

Reviewed by Nancy Blanning

Young children have an ally in Erika Christakis. This Gateways book review section usually features new WECAN publications. But when a book in mainstream educational literature supports and encourages our own work, we should know about this resource. *The Importance of Being Little* is such a publication.



Erika Christakis is an early childhood educator at the Yale Child Study Center. There she teaches classes on child development and education policy. But her path to early childhood education was not direct. She was always drawn to young children but was discouraged from becoming a preschool teacher; she was told to “aspire to something higher.” After graduating from Harvard, she worked in public health in many capacities. But her work always led her back to questions about the healthy development of children and families. Having her own children reoriented her to directly working with children in mainstream settings. She did not like what she saw and increasingly observed that the emphasis on the “push down” of academic tasks to younger and younger children was not working. More importantly, this approach defied the innate creative, dynamic, exploratory, curious, interested-in-all-things nature of young children. She has come more and more to speak out against the current system of worksheets, phonics drills, and direct instruction. These things suck the life and joy out of early childhood. She is a recognized expert in child development and has truly

observed children. Young children have confirmed to her the wisdom that exists in their very being. They are not already “behind” or “deficient” when they join early childhood classes. They will flourish in the right environment. As she states in her conclusion, “the environment is the curriculum.”

In the eleven sections of her 300-page book, Ms. Christakis affirms that learning arises out of relationship with the adults, not from the purchased curriculum materials. She confirms that children need opportunity to play and explore. She describes her “top list” of elements that support good early childhood experiences. These include: close, affectionate interactions between caregivers and children, including frequent laughter; natural, spontaneous conversational language between children and teachers; opportunities to learn socially from peers rather than didactic (preaching) instruction; staff who enjoy children and are knowledgeable about child development milestones; classroom materials that invite open-ended, not closed forms of play and exploration; and adequate time for children to do all the things we know they are capable of. To Waldorf ears, this describes the environment we strive to create for children. Our practices coincide with this list.

Ms. Christakis is also a researcher. This book is full of references to studies that support the importance of the points listed above. The reader will find research to validate the importance of play for young children and the ineffectiveness (and inappropriateness) of academic instruction before first grade. Information in this book can give us new material to bring to our parents who love Waldorf education with their feelings but are anxious in our fear-filled world for “real research” to validate our positions.

The book discusses topics related to academic instruction that do not affect Waldorf early childhood programs directly. However, I found reading the whole book valuable and instructive. While we do not teach phonics in kindergarten, it is important for all Waldorf early childhood educators to know what the society is moving children toward. We can see that the rich language environment we provide through circle rhymes, verses, stories, and carefully chosen

speech is the foundation for linking together sounds, letter forms, and meaning in the years to come.

Her concluding summary speaks eloquently.

“The miracle of early learning is simply this: if we prepare a responsive learning environment, we won’t have to break educational objectives into bite-sized pieces; we can feed a child a whole meal. We don’t have to continually poke and prod and monitor and assess young children. We don’t have to harass their teachers and parents either. It’s the learning environment, not the preschoolers inhabiting it, that needs correction if found wanting. The environment is the curriculum. Fix that, and we can leave young children to thrive.”

Erika Christakis is an advocate for seeing the child as “whole” and for allowing the child’s experience of the world be whole as well, not fragmented into discrete skills and learning objectives.

As Waldorf educators we cannot feel complacent or delude ourselves into thinking that we have “the right answer.” We are challenged daily to respond to the children’s changing needs and developmental questions they pose to us. This book confirms that, in Ms. Christakis’s view of a program striving toward quality, we have an excellent foundation. This book, from a mainstream source, is one we can share with parents to reassure them with “research” that they have made a sound educational choice for their child. ♦

Resources

An important part of WECAN’s mission is to create and gather resources for educators. We would like to direct Gateways readers to some resources of which everyone might not be aware.

Visit our website, www.waldorfearlychildhood.org, to explore a wealth of online resources for educators and parents, and to subscribe to our Research Digest email newsletter.

Recent uploads to our online resources include “Healthy Organizational Practices,” Parts I and II; “Six Gestures for the Waldorf Early Childhood Educator,” also published in this issue; “Guidelines for Observing School Readiness”; and “Best Practices with Parents,” reporting results of a recent survey of teachers and parents.

Subscribe to the Research Digest email newsletter by going to www.waldorfearlychildhood.org and clicking on the “Join Our Email List” icon found at the bottom left corner of the page, filling out the form, and checking the “Research Digest” box at the bottom.

You may also direct parents to the “Parents and Families” section of our website.

Finally, we encourage you to visit the International Association for Steiner-Waldorf Early Childhood

Education (IASWECE), at www.iaswece.org. See their “News and Events” link for recent research and publications, upcoming international conferences, and more.

Additional Reading. Many of our authors’ excellent resources, listed following each article, and some of the additional resources listed here are also available online, in particular through the Online Waldorf Library (OWL). Visit the OWL at www.waldorflibrary.org.

- Blanning, Nancy, and Laurie Clark, *Movement Journeys and Circle Adventures Volume 2* (2016).
- Köhler, Henning, “Exploring the Life Sense,” in *Working with Anxious, Nervous and Depressed Children* (Chatham: Waldorf Publications, 2013).
- The Spacial Dynamics Institute: Learn more about the Spacial Dynamics Institute and its founder, Jaimen MacMillan, at www.spacialdynamics.com.
- Steiner, Rudolf, “The Twelve Human Senses,” in *Toward Imagination: Culture and the Individual* (Great Barrington: Steiner Books, 1990).
- Von Kügelgen, Helmut, *Spiritual Insights*, Susan Howard, Ed. (Spring Valley: Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America 2013).